Disrupting the Binary of Otherness—A Semiotic Reading of the Performance *L'autre* by Claudio Stellato

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Black. The lights are slowly illuminating the stage—a black box created by a black dance floor and opaque flats on the side and back walls. A red carpet, half rolled, lies on the ground. The base plate of a wooden cabinet is visible in the background. A darkly dressed, barefooted man enters the lit space, slowly walking forward. His head is to one side, appearing snapped off at the front. On his shoulders, an old chest of drawers is balancing. Silence. No sounds are audible. The man stops walking, standing still. Suddenly the red carpet unfolds without obvious human intervention. The man turns to one side so that his profile is visible. He slowly bends his knees and begins lowering himself. His hands are touching the floor, his body turns to an all-fours position. Stretching his legs back, he slowly positions his body, spread-eagle, on the ground. With his hands, he places two feet of the chest of drawers on the ground, its upper part staying connected to his shoulders. Silence.

"*The Other* is the craziness we carry inside, it is confusion and instinct, twisted logic and genuine feelings, a child in an adult's body" (Festival Novog Cirkusa 2012).

The contemporary circus performance *L'autre*,[1] created in 2008 by Claudio Stellato and his partner Martin Firket, was promoted by the above quotation at the 2012 Festival Novog Cirkusa in Croatia. What is presented on stage is the interaction between an artistic body and three pieces of furniture: a red carpet, an old chest of drawers, and a cabinet, which move without obvious external forms of propulsion. The performance takes place in a black box. Only at the ending is music used. Everything happens in silence. Some of the noise created by the action is amplified with the help of speakers. The auditorium is completely dark. Eleven clear lights and four floodlights are used to draw attention to what happens on stage.

Claudio Stellato in *L'Autre*. Photo credit: Cie Claudio Stellato.

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Given its title, *L'autre* obviously contributes to discourse about otherness, and an objection could be made that it might be redundant to analyze the performance with regard to the topic of difference. The structuralist approach chosen for this paper, however, "is less interested in interpreting what . . . works mean. . . . [I am interested] in explaining *how* they can mean what they mean; that is, in showing what implicit rules and conventions are operating in a given work" (Baldick 2001, 320). This paper aims to show how within the circus performance *L'autre* the construction of otherness is based on the repetition and adoption of conventional conceptions of otherness. I explore in what ways the production simultaneously manages to subvert and overcome commonplace binaries such as "self" and "other" through its semantic structure.

The theoretical basis for this performance analysis lies in the structuralist assumption that "the elements composing any cultural phenomenon . . . are similarly 'relational': that is, they have meaning only by virtue of their contrasts with other elements of the system, especially in binary oppositions of paired opposites" (Baldick 2001, 320). Within this understanding, texts[2] are able to produce equivalences that are independent of conventional cultural equivalences through the formation of parallelism, comparisons, metaphors, and other contiguous procedures. They are thereby—to a limited extent—able to create their own paradigm, which can in turn become part of a culture (Baßler 2007, 359). "Structuralist analysis seeks the underlying system . . . that governs individual utterances or instances. In formulating the laws by which elements of such a system are combined, it distinguishes between sets of interchangeable units (paradigms) and sequences of such units in combination (syntagms), thereby outlining a basic 'syntax' of human culture" (Baldick 2001, 320). Thus, by using structuralist methods of analysis, it is this paper's objective to explain how the performance *L'autre* functions.

Interpretation

At first glance, circus seems a genre in which spoken or written natural language tends to play a subordinate role. Looking at circus performances more precisely, it is clear that this assessment is only partly true—at least it is seldom found in the strict interpretation of "narrating without language" in which "a story unknown to the appreciator is evoked by the purely sensory, non-semantic resources of image or sound" (Ryan 2009, 272). Performances usually have a language-based title to suggest a narrative interpretation. Furthermore, descriptions in program booklets and advertising materials give the performances their first thematic classification. This is the case in the performance under discussion: its title *L'autre* provides paratextual framing. Automatically, we not only classify the pieces of furniture as objects but also assume that they are the other. We complete the information of what we actually see according to certain cultural patterns and thus form our idea of the performance's overall topic (Baßler 2011).

In the following, I would like to focus on three main conventional concepts of otherness with which the performance engages: a concept of otherness in which someone portrays oneself at the centre of focus and the other as the outside; a classification of the other as mysterious and foreign; and the use of attributes of otherness such as animality, abnormality, and freakery. How do these concepts dominate the process of meaning-generation? In what way does the performance deal with culturally established paradigms, and through what means are these paradigms transcended?

Proscenium Stage and Spatial Objects

The concept of otherness in which someone portrays themselves at the centre of focus and the other as the outside is established by the opposition inside and outside created at two levels: on the level of the relationship between stage and spectators, and on the stage itself. In the

performance under discussion, a proscenium stage, framed by black curtains, is used: on a technical level this choice makes the magic illusions possible and on a semantic level it creates a distance between the spectators and the actions on stage. Dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster proclaims:

> The proscenium theatre emphasizes the separation of audience and performance by situating the action on stage in a different realm from that of the viewers. The architecture delineates the functional role for viewers—as observers who sit facing in one direction toward the stage—and for performers—as residents of the framed, boslike structure on the stage. (1986, 60–61)

The theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte goes even further by attributing a political dimension to the proscenium performance space, explaining that it identifies the spectator as "an indiscreet observer who penetrates more or less unjustifiably the sphere of the actor" (1983, 141). This effect, which is attributed to proscenium stages in general, is enhanced by the special lighting used in *L'autre*. By focusing spotlights on the actor and furniture while leaving the surrounding area in the dark, the view of the spectator is mediated. She is looking from the outside to the "inside" of what is happening. With regard to the discourse of otherness, the choice of a proscenium stage therefore obtains a semantic meaning: the artist is portrayed at the centre of focus and the other, the audience, at the outside—and vice versa.

Fischer-Lichte continues: due to the use of a proscenium space, the auditorium is no longer a place of the public life of society. It becomes a "projection screen for the inwardness of the individual viewer" (Fischer-Lichte 1983, 141). Thereby, with regard to the performance space used in *L'autre,* the establishment of the opposition inside/outside not only focuses on the concept of the other as the outside but also marks the other as an inner difference within the self. On a metaphorical level, it thereby makes visual what the programmers of the Festival Novog Cirkusa describe in their marketing of the production: "The artist incarnates himself, but also 'the other'; the conscious 'me' and the subconscious, imaginary 'me', coexisting in the same body" (Festival Novog Cirkusa, 2012).

The double reading of the concept of otherness, the inside/outside and me/inner-me, is repeated through the scenography onstage. The old chest of drawers and the cabinet are illuminated indirectly so that the three-dimensionality and the spatial depth of the furniture are underlined. The actor repeatedly disappears in the pieces of furniture—sometimes completely, sometimes with body parts visible on the outside. The performance creates an imaginary reminiscent of Russian nesting dolls: the audience is looking from the outside into the proscenium stage, into the spatial furniture—both in terms of observing the other, but also in looking into the inside of the self.

New Magic, Clarity, and Lighting

New Magic is a primary procedure by which *L'autre* generates meaning. The art form emerged in 2002. Despite using the repertory of gestured codes and conventions of modern magic (e.g., the manipulation of cards, coins or cigarettes, the act of sawing a woman into half, or magic runes), the aim of new magicians is to "free the discipline from its familiar and formal limits" (Jacob 2010, 4). It thereby makes use of traditional techniques but changes the way of presentation. New Magic transforms the stage reality itself: "*New magic* plays with the real within the real: that is to say, within the same space-time offered by perception. Images no longer correspond with an illusionist act. They make up a proper order to reality" (Navarro in Bordenave 2010, 5).

L'autre uses this principle as a main dramaturgical strategy. Despite creating a magical, fictional universe, it continuously underlines the ordinariness and thereby the reality of the setting by incorporating standard furniture and discreet dark grey costumes, and by reducing "artificial" sounds to a minimum (noises created by the action itself are amplified with the help of speakers but songs are only used at the very end). Therefore, the performance repeats signs that underline the reality of what is happening while consistently creating images of unreality. The ordinary characteristics are also attributed to the "invisible" spaces around the stage: for a few seconds, bright lighting is used to illuminate the surroundings to reinforce the impression that there is nothing to animate the moving object—"There is no magic happening. What you see is real!" With this bright light, the seeming reality reinforces the unreal events: the moving furniture, the flying cabinet, the breathing carpet are staged as being real and unreal at the same time. By using the repetition of equivalences and oppositions, the performance builds its own paradigm: the other is classified as being mysterious and foreign. But these characteristics are also ascribed to the opponent of the other: the self or, within this understanding, the real.

One-Minute Sculptures, Movement, and Sound

The objects used in the performance are attributed with characteristics of living things such as movement and respiration. The red carpet seems to advance to the side of the playing space independently; the rhythmical opening and closing of the old chest of drawers is reminiscent of inhalation and exhalation. The pieces of furniture are staged not as inanimate objects, but as animated subjects. The artist creates sculptures through their interactions with the furniture that last for some seconds due to the slowness of the movement. With these sculptures, which pose opposition to the living traits of the furniture, the performance makes visible attributes of otherness that are often present in everyday concepts and thus culturally established: animality, abnormality, and freakery. Body and object together create animal-like shapes which can be easily decoded, as they are directly referring to familiar images from the spectators' reality. In this picture, for example, the performer trapped in the chest of drawers with the moving legs outside is reminiscent of a crab trying to move forward. The link between animality and otherness is reinforced by the use of acoustic signs. Sounds as consequences of activity—the breathing of the artist, his scratching and grating on the wooden furniture—are not avoided, but highlighted by their repetition and volume.

Claudio Stellato in *L'Autre*. Photo credit: Cie Claudio Stellato.

Furthermore, the interaction of the body with the object creates images that reference a concept of otherness connected with Hurley's thesis that "all circus bodies are stained with the residue of the sideshow freak body" (Hurley 2016, 134). While using elements of New Magic and

contortion, the performance visually demonstrates two of the categories of freakery distinguished by Hurley: the "born freak" and the "made freak" (134). According to Hurley, "with the contortionist, the connection to freaks, particularly 'born freaks,' intensifies. . . . The contortionist . . . is naturally physically prodigious, even if this prodigality is not quite so immediately visible as the born freak's" (134). *L'autre* not only presents a born freak by using elements of contortion, but goes even further by creating images of a head separated from the body or a torso separated from the legs using elements of New Magic. Such simulation of natural exceptionality in a *mise en scène* is, according to Hurley, classified as the faked freak, "who use[s] combinations of costume, *mise en scène*, and makeup to trick audiences into believing . . . [she is a] freak" (134). Within this procedure, the performance is self-referential to its own genre, in the sense that it is picking up emblems of traditional circus. The images created remind one of the famous trick of sawing a woman in half, which alludes to the disciplinary heritage of magic, the "*modern magic*" (Jacob 2010, 4).
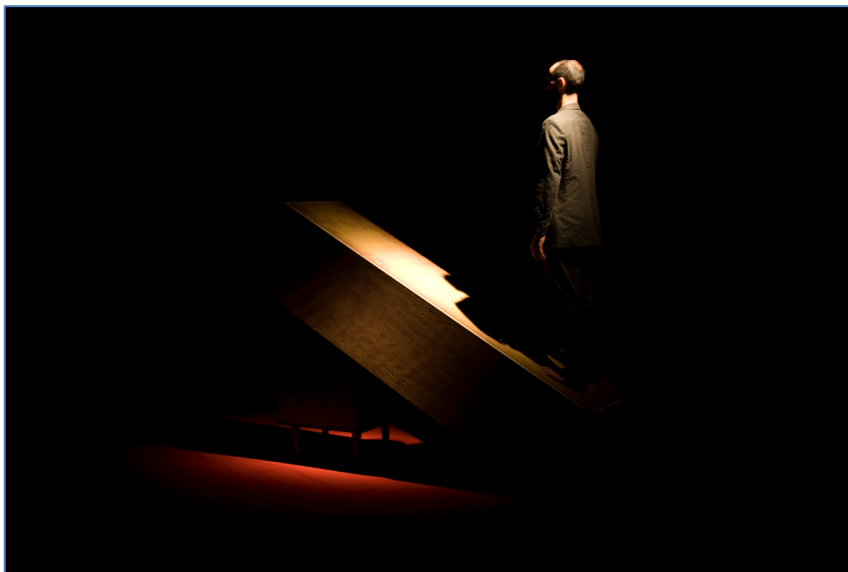

Claudio Stellato in L'Autre. Photo credit Cie Claudio Stellato.

During the performance, the focus is on the (moving) objects and the fusion between object and body, not on the artist himself—save for the ending where the represented figure shows facial expression for the first time. Due to the change of facial expression from neutral and object-like to reflective, astounded, and human-like, the staged character acquires human traits. From the position of this ending moment, the performance thereby achieves narrative consistency.

Border Crossing: The Performance's Narrative Structure

Before closing this paper, I would like to delve deeper into this narrativity present in *L'autre*. In what way is the performance narrating the other? It seems to be classifiable as a "texture"—a text that does not possess any coherent structure, that cannot be paraphrased and is therefore incomprehensible, that refers to its technique or form (Baßler 1994, 13). Looking at it more closely, one realizes that the minimal condition of narrative—a change of state, the existence of an event, the "shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field" (Lotman 1977, 233)—is realized. At the end of the performance, the artist leaves the stage, goes into the void. *Black. A man in a suit takes a bow. Black. A man in a suit takes a bow. Black. Two men in suits take a bow.* At this point, the performance not only explicitly shows that there is a second person manipulating the objects, but also, on the textual level, shifts the constitutive order established in its first section. While at the beginning the semantic space[3] of otherness was defined by the binary opposition "me" and "the other object," it is now (due to the emergence of a second person who looks like the first) defined as a complex relationship between "me," "the other me," "the other object," and "the other subject." This transformation can be classified as a meta-event "which involves not only the passage of the protagonist from the first to the second subset as a result of his boundary crossing, but also the modification of the entire field, the world order itself" (Hühn 2013, 13) With this "restitutive structure" (Martinez and Scheffel 2012, 158), the performance reinforces its definition of otherness which breaks with the conventional binary conception.

Claudio Stellato in L'Autre. Photo credit: Cie Claudio Stellato.

Conclusion

L'autre undermines culturally established concepts, frames, and scripts of the other by disrupting the boundaries between self and other, between object and subject, and by attributing reality, unreality, animality, abnormality, humanity, normality, and freakery to both me and the other. The performance adopts culturally established frames and scripts, and at the same time overcomes common binary oppositions. As a contemporary circus performance, its meaning is based on "the circus's historic status as a site for the celebration and exploitation of differences, from the staging of exceptional bodies to the display of 'freakery'" (Circus and Its Others 2015); at the same time, it significantly exceeds its heritage. Through its structure and substance, *The Other* simultaneously others and de-others the other.

Notes

1. French for "other."

2. This article is based on a broad definition of "text" based on the thesis that we are able to treat all kinds of cultural representations as texts. "By singling out syntagmatic and paradigmatic bonds . . . we can discern semiotic objects in these arts, systems constructed on the model of languages. Inasmuch as man's consciousness is a linguistic consciousness, all types of models erected as supersstructures on that consciousness—and art among them—can be defined as secondary modeling systems. Thus art can be described as a sort of secondary language, and the work of art as a text in that language" (Lotman 1977, 9).

3. Space is "the sum total of homogeneous objects (phenomena, states, functions, figures, variable meanings, and so on), between which relations exist which are similar to normal spatial relations (continuity, distance and so on)" (Lotman 1977, 217).

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